

Engaging Youth in St Vincent and The Grenadines in Agriculture: Their Fears, Expectations and Food Production Interests

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Abstract

Some countries in the Caribbean have initiated youth oriented projects to address their aging farming population while others are developing policies to encourage youth to pursue a career in food production. A study conducted among 109 students of agriculture (56% female:44% male) at the secondary level in St. Vincent and the Grenadines sought to determine students' perceptions of the incentives and disincentives to pursuing a career in food production, the likelihood that they will engage in farming in the near future and their preferred areas of food production. A close ended, self reporting survey instrument was used to collect data. Results indicated that income generation, changing the nature of farming in SVG and studying agricultural science in school were the top ranked reasons for considering a future in agriculture. The highest ranked disincentives were lack of government support, the costs of starting up an enterprise and lack of local agricultural training opportunities. The majority of students (78%) indicated some likelihood to engage the sector in the near future. Strongest interest were shown for working in the Ministry of Agriculture, pursuing higher education in agriculture, and farming using new technologies such as "Greenhouses" and Agro-processing. The results suggest a generally favorable predisposition to farming by SVG youth. However, concerted efforts to put enabling policies and strategies in place to further encourage them are needed. The considerable interest shown in salaried jobs and higher education in the sector, while laudable, must be matched with a cadre of food production-oriented young persons.

Key words: youth, aged farming populations, agricultural policies

Introduction

The economy of SVG is dependent primarily on agriculture for foreign exchange earnings. In 2010, agriculture contributed 10 % to Gross Domestic Product, and bananas have been its primary export crop followed by a variety of root crops. Due to international agreements, diseases, other reasons,

banana production is no longer profitable. Moreover, the industry has seen a decline from a high of 7,000 in 1980 down to 2,000 banana farmers presently. Whereas, the population is relatively young, a greater proportion of those involved in agriculture are in the older age group. The Agricultural Census of 2000 reported that 15% of farm holdings were owned by persons over 65 years. At the same time, the

unemployment rate is estimated to be over 20% and unemployment is highest among the younger age group. This concern being faced by St. Vincent government is one for regional governments. Across the Caribbean, it is estimated that the average age of the farmer population is over 50 years, with this figure being much higher in some countries. It is estimated (Brown-Chen, 1990) that 404,000 persons or 15% of the region's labour force are unemployed and of this total, 51% or 204,000 are between the ages of 15 –24.

One of the major reasons for the high age of the farmer population is that young persons are not entering the industry in meaningful numbers. The widely reported drudgery, hard work and little financial rewards associated with agriculture seem to be the major deterrents to young persons entering the sector. While several initiatives have been tried in the region to reverse this situation, the problem still persists and has now become more urgent.

The situation is further complicated in that much of the unemployment is based in the rural areas and given their limited options and opportunities, many rural youth migrate or drift to urban areas in search of social and economic advancement. Although a very daunting challenge, it is felt that holistic agricultural development establishes a mechanism for curbing the outflow from rural areas, as well as providing meaningful contributions for both poverty reduction and advancing economic growth.

Governments across the region are committed to diversifying their economies away from dependence on energy, as in Trinidad, and dependence on tourism as in most of the other countries. The major goal is to generate employment, alternative rural livelihood opportunities and consequently increased income generation. Indeed, the St Vincent government has signaled at various fora and in its Medium Term Economic

Strategy, the intention to have a much higher level of youth involvement in Food Production, not just primary production of agriculture products.

Based on the data we know that young persons are not interested in traditional farming, but this does not imply that they may not be interested in careers in Food Production. The business of producing food has changed over the years to embrace several activities along the agri-business value chain to include processing, and marketing. Are young persons interested in Food Production?

This paper explores the perceptions of youth in St Vincent towards a career of food production. It seeks to elaborate their views about the issues that encourage them as well as those that discourage them from engaging the sector. Further, it seeks to enquire about the areas of food production they may be interested in and what can government do to promote an enabling environment that will facilitate their sustained engagement of the sector.

Literature Review

Caribbean youth under thirty years make up two thirds of the population, and it is likely that in the future this figure will not continue to grow, since forecasts indicate a lower demographic growth rate from 2015 onwards (World Bank 2008). Despite this, due to their numbers and potential impact, rural youth must be a major part of any equation dealing with immediate and long-term solutions to solving economic and sustainable development issues. It has been suggested (Dunlap and Webster 2009) that although young people need education and training to prepare them to become viable agriculturalists and leaders of the future, more importantly, they must receive support and access to resources to enable them to become a part of this equation.

In the Caribbean, the FAO and the IICA are the major organizations that work

in a supportive role with regional governments to address the concerns of youth disinterest in agriculture. However, the situation of youth lack of involvement continues to be a real problem for national governments and other youth developmental workers (FAO 2009; Freedman 2008).

Poverty and the limitations of small island economies affect rural youth, restricting their opportunity to complete schooling or to find employment. Young men in particular feel disenfranchised and participate less at the community level, so it is more difficult to involve them in economic activities. Often young people see agriculture as an unsatisfactory employment option unless they see instant economic gains or are taking over a family business and youth rarely understand or appreciate the value of agriculture or the impact this industry can have on their immediate lives and future (Ganpat and Webster 2009; Webster and Ganpat 2008).

Rural poor in the Caribbean mainly consists of young low-skilled individuals, people under twenty years of age, women who are heads of households, locals craftsman and small-scale farmers. These subsets are often formed as a result of lack of access to land and resources, out-migration by men in search of employment, and restricted funds for schooling. Most rural poor are detached from the mainstream economy, which is highly dependent on international trade and is susceptible to global developments and external shocks (IFAD 2009). This creates difficulties for many who depend on sustainable farming as a source of income. This has further contributed to the declining youth engagement in the agriculture sector.

Cook (1995) in a summary of youth programmes across the world, including the Caribbean, suggested that programs need to be relevant, up to date and practical as seen by youth, and that such programs should lead to financial

independence. There are several successful agricultural youth programs in the region such as the 4H movement (a youth based organization designed to teach youth through the concept of "learning by doing"), the teaching of agricultural science in secondary schools, and the Youth Apprenticeship Program in Agriculture (YAPA) in Trinidad. At the regional level, the Caribbean Agriculture Forum for Youth (CAFY) was established in 2002 to promote youth involvement in the agriculture community in the region.

In a study in selected Caribbean countries, Mangal (2009) reported that, in Barbados, parents do not encourage children to get involved in agriculture due to the general negative perception of farming. This belief is supported by the thought that the education sector trains youth for jobs rather than job creation, there is poor communication of incentives and policies for youth, and the general difficulty in accessing credit and absence of a reward programme. In Grenada, financing for youth entrepreneurial programmes was a major issue as well as lack of resources and in St. Lucia, the main incentive was that youth were aware that farming was a profitable enterprise and were interested in making the country food secure. The common thread found throughout these programs is the belief held by much of society regarding agriculture. Both youth and adults hold negative views about agriculture and its ability to be a viable source of income. These attitudes are supported by governments' inclusion of youth in the agricultural industry. Investing in young people's future is creating opportunities for engagement, involvement as social actors in the agricultural industry. In a study in Trinidad, Ganpat and Webster (2010) found that young people living in rural areas, especially those who are the most marginal and vulnerable need to be empowered to understand how their contributions impact the agricultural sector.

Some of the disincentives were: the view of farming as dirty work, lack of financial support or credit, limited infrastructure and market access in rural areas, belief that agriculture is for uneducated people, the negative stigma attached to agriculture, difficulty in getting credit, unstable product prices, and low level of technology applied.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to: (1) Assess and rank on order of importance, students' perceptions of the incentives and the disincentives towards a career in food production: (2) Prioritize the areas of food production interests of youth and (3) Assess students' likelihood to pursue a career in food production in the near future.

Methodology

A survey was conducted among young persons (N=109) in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The persons surveyed were the population of young persons who were studying agriculture in the secondary school system: Georgetown secondary (n=35); Bishops College (n=34) and Technical College (n=36) and four (4) other young persons who had just exited the formal school system. The schools were chosen to reflect students living closer to the urban areas (Bishop's college) and one in the rural area (Georgetown secondary) who chose to pursue agricultural science at the CXC level and the only technical school where agriculture is offered at the post secondary certificate level. The survey instrument was a structured questionnaire consisting of only close-ended questions which collected personal and demographic data as well as two sets of statements which sought to assess students' perception of the issues that will encourage them (15 statements) and issues that may discourage them (16 statements) to a

career in food production. Areas of Food Production interests were also assessed. Responses to the statements were measured on a four point rating scale. Results were analyzed using SPSS v. 17 and summarized as percentages and means and reported.

Results

Sample characteristics

The majority of young persons were students in the formal school system (92%) that was pursuing agriculture as a subject for examination. The sample consisted of 43.4% males and 56.6 % females with mean age of 16.8 years. The majority had secondary level education at the CXC Ordinary level certificate; 25.5% had post secondary education and (5.7%) tertiary level education. Some 83.3 % reported being involved in agricultural activities, of which 56.6 % were into backyard gardening, and the rest assisted in semi commercial and full commercial production. The majority were into vegetable production and only a small amount (9%) into livestock.

Encouraging Issues

The list of encouraging issues is presented in rank order as perceived by students (Table 1). Results show that income generation objectives, to change farming practices and studying agriculture at school were the main issues that would drive a career in agriculture. Studying agriculture at school was very important as well as to be able to use modern technology and to contribute to increased food production in St Vincent. The fact that parents have land and other resources and were into farming was listed as the least of the considerations to pursue a career in the field. These were not strong discouraging factors however.

Discouraging issues

Table 2 shows the list of discouraging issues in rank order as perceived by students. It shows that issues that deal with insufficient Government support, poor access to loans, limited training and access to land for farming were the top ranked discouraging issues. Policy issues: absence of clear policy; fiscal incentives not encouraging and high start-up costs were mid ranked. The fear that farming will not provide a secure livelihood in the future, the stigma of agriculture and other related issues were ranked lower, but not entirely discouraging.

Areas of Food Production interests

Table 3 shows that the main interest was not in areas directly related to actual farming, but had to do with post production activities, namely agro processing. Among the areas highly preferred was pursuing higher education, followed by involvement in technology oriented agriculture. Working in the government service was also ranked fairly high as an interest. Poultry and crop production were lower ranked and pig production was ranked lowest. The only significant difference based on gender was in working in the Ministry of Agriculture where females preferred this interest more than males.

Likelihood to pursue agriculture as a career

Results showed that the majority of young persons (78.3 %) expressed a desire to pursue a career in food production in the next five years (strong likelihood 31.1%; some likelihood 47.2%) and the rest expressed no likelihood.

Discussion

The results show that there can be some optimism for the future of agriculture in SVG. Since this study was conducted among youth pursuing agriculture at the secondary level, the results cannot be generalized to the entire youth population. However, pursuing Agriculture Science in school appears to be a positive influence on a young person's perceptions of agriculture. The results also indicate that young persons are more interested in the newer areas of agriculture; value addition and marketing. Young persons also saw further training as very important and this is a good sign. To be a successful farmer in these times require that those involved in the field continuously educate themselves and keep abreast of modern techniques. There is scope for the development of post production activities and young persons may be more inclined to engage in these aspects rather than the laborious primary production activities. Value addition for crop, livestock and fish is an opportunity for the government of SVG to support and facilitate youth development. The only concern about career interest would be that youth saw "working in the Ministry of Agriculture" as a fairly high on their agenda. While not to be discouraged as this is a noble career, it is incumbent on the policy makers to make the other areas as attractive.

Tours and apprenticeships to successful youth in agriculture enterprises

across the country as well as a coordinated public awareness programme highlighting these successful enterprises would go a long way in actively promoting a career outside of the government.

The prioritized reasons for possible engagement in agriculture was income related and this is commendable, Agriculture must be seen as a business venture as any other, and the goal must be to be financial security. Far too often persons engage the sector because of emotional even romantic reasons and consequently do not engage the practices for intensive and economic production which is required for national agriculture development. Studying agriculture in school was another main factor and tends to suggest that if more youth are engaged at the formal school level to scientific agriculture there may be a greater likelihood that more young persons would at least consider a future in the sector. Presently, agriculture is taught only in some secondary schools across the country. For a country that is dependent on agriculture for foreign exchange earnings, this decision has to be revisited and perhaps engage more schools in teaching agriculture science. It may even consider making it compulsory in all primary and secondary schools in rural areas, in areas close to fishing communities, sea fisheries should find its way on the formal curriculum. The facts that family has land and they are into farming were not the strongest of the encouraging issues. This shows that youth are looking beyond what their parents are doing, which is most likely the traditional form of farming, and are looking to other incentives that would make them interested in a career in food production. The use of modern technology was a fairly high ranked incentive and also a food production using "greenhouses" was a high ranked area of interest among youth.

Among the factors that did not encourage youth in a career in agriculture

had to do with the financial resources to start a venture in agriculture and associated with that was the absence of governmental support in that regard. It is hardly likely that poor rural youth, even if they had access to family land, would have the financial resources to engage farming. As such a priority facilitating action of government has to be making grants and soft loans available and to widely communicate this to youth. The absence of educational programs to empower youth in farming methods was listed fairly high and this needs to be addressed. Fortunately, this has been recognized by government and a training centre for farmer education is being developed. This facility is also expected to conduct training programs for young persons. It is heartening to note that for these youth issues which connote negative ideas of farming such as "Farming is for uneducated persons only", "Family will think less of me" and "Agricultural activities are for poor people only" do not have much negative effect. These statements attracted high levels of disagreement suggesting that youth are prepared to go beyond these traditional fears determined in other studies in the region.

Conclusion

There is a general favorable attitude towards a career in food production among the youths surveyed. These were young persons who chose to study agricultural science at the secondary and post-secondary level. This augurs well for St Vincent and the Grenadines. Since all schools do not teach Agricultural science, there may be some benefit in having it mandatory in the school system at both primary and secondary levels, given the importance of agriculture to the economy.

Youth have expressed the newer areas of food production: value addition, processing and marketing as preferred areas for engagement and consequently it

falls on government to facilitate this through education, financial support and marketing in these areas.

Overall, government should take advantage of the favorable predispositions among these youth and put in place strategies and actions to engage them as soon as they leave the school system. A definitive youth policy to spell out incentives, other support mechanisms and a public awareness exercise targeting young people would go a long way in promoting increased youth involvement in agriculture in St Vincent and the Grenadines.

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Table 1: Rank ordering of Encouraging Issues by youth in St. Vincent and the Grenadines

STATEMENT	SA	A	D	SD	MEAN(SD)
To be able to generate additional income in the future	56.6	35.8	5.7	.90	3.49 (.66)
To change the nature of farming in my country	61.3	27.4	7.5	3.8	3.46 (.79)
Studied Agricultural Science at school	55.7	30.2	6.6	1.9	3.44 (.72)
To contribute to increased food production for the country	45.3	45.3	5.7	.90	3.36 (.65)
To increase the use of modern technology	52.8	28.3	12.3	2.8	3.33 (.82)
Believe I can make a successful career if given the chance	48.1	36.8	11.3	2.8	3.31 (.79)
Saw an opportunity for self-employment	36.8	52.8	6.6	.90	3.27 (.64)
Love working with nature	42.5	43.4	8.5	2.8	3.27 (.75)
Improve living conditions for rural youth and families	35.8	47.2	12.3	2.8	3.17 (.76)
A practical option for early school-leavers	32.1	48.1	13.2	.90	3.14 (.70)
Youth being positively engaged in my community	32.1	49.1	16.0	1.9	3.12 (.74)
Believe farming is fascinating/interesting	30.2	50.0	14.2	2.8	3.09 (.75)
Being seen as a role model in my community	35.8	37.7	11.3	11.3	3.00 (.97)
Parents have land, other resources	26.4	41.5	24.5	3.8	2.93 (.82)
Parents/family are into farming	26.7	37.1	19.0	11.4	2.82 (.95)
OVERALL MEAN and Std Deviation	48.2 (5.61)				

Table 2: Rank order of Discouraging factors among youth in St. Vincent and the Grenadines

STATEMENTS	SA	A	D	SD	MEAN;SD
The government does not give enough support to young people to start new agricultural ventures	54.7	33.0	7.5	4.7	3.38 (.82)
Ability to receive governmental loans or bank loans	42.5	33.0	3.8	3.8	3.23 (.78)
Access to training or government sponsored programs	34.9	39.6	4.7	1.9	3.17 (.70)
Access to land	33.0	33.0	13.2	0	3.09 (.71)
Absence of a clear policy/plan for youth involvement to improve agriculture	38.7	30.2	19.8	9.4	2.99 (.99)
Present incentives for farming	32.1	38.7	21.7	7.5	2.95 (.92)
The potential costs of starting up an agricultural venture/activity are too expensive.	25.5	51.9	14.2	8.5	2.94 (.86)
There aren't educational programs for young people to gain training in agriculture.	20.8	40.6	19.8	15.1	2.69 (.96)
Agriculture is a career choice that will not make a lot of money.	17.0	17.9	38.7	20.8	2.34 (.99)
My friends would think less of me if I became involved in agricultural activities.	15.1	12.3	41.5	29.2	2.14 (1.0)
I cannot support a family or myself on the income made by a farmer.	8.5	16.0	40.6	30.2	2.05 (.90)
I see no real future for farming in this country	10.4	13.2	25.5	47.2	1.89 (1.0)
Agricultural activities will not allow a young person to sustain a high quality of life.	4.7	17.0	34.9	42.9	1.84 (.88)
My family will think less of me if I became involved in agricultural activities.	6.6	10.4	31.1	50.9	1.73 (.90)
Farming is for uneducated persons only	8.5	2.8	17.9	69.8	1.51 (.91)
Agricultural activities are for poor people only	3.8	2.8	16.0	73.6	1.39 (.74)
OVERALL MEAN and Std Deviation					39.2 (5.67)

Table 3: Prioritized areas of food production interests by Gender (means and standard deviations)

Highest overall	Highest- MALE	Highest- FEMALE
Agro-processing of Fruits, vegetables & Livestock VSI= 57%; SI= 36.8%; I= 9.4%; NI= 0.9% MEAN=3.42	Agro-processing of Fruits, vegetables & Livestock <i>MEAN- 3.39; Std Dev.-.68</i>	Working in the Min. of Agriculture <i>MEAN-3.53; Std Dev.- .71</i>
Pursuing higher training in Agriculture VSI=61.3%; SI=21.7%;I=12.3%; NI=4.7% MEAN=3.40	Modern methods using "Greenhouses" <i>MEAN- 3.35; Std Dev.- .82</i>	Pursuing higher training in Agriculture <i>MEAN- 3.48; Std Dev.- .83</i>
Modern methods using "Greenhouses" VSI=54.7%; SI=30.2%;I=13.2%; NI=1.9% MEAN=3.38	Pursuing higher training in Agriculture <i>MEAN- 3.28; Std Dev.- .93</i>	Agro-processing of Fruits, vegetables & Livestock <i>MEAN- 3.43; Std Dev.- .72</i>
Working in the Min. of Agriculture VSI=59.4%; SI=20.8%; I=16%; NI=2.8% MEAN=3.37	Working in the Min. of Agriculture <i>MEAN- 3.17; Std Dev.- 1.0</i>	Modern methods using "Greenhouses" <i>MEAN- 3.40; Std Dev.- .76</i>
Contract farming for Hotels and export etc VSI=44.3%;SI=25.5%;I=22.6%;NI;7.5% MEAN=3.07	Crop production using modern irrigation and fertilization methods <i>MEAN- 3.13; Std Dev.- .74</i>	Fish farming on land e.g. Aquaculture <i>MEAN- 3.11; Std Dev.- 1.0</i>
Intensive methods of poultry production VSI=29.2%;SI=44.3%;I=20.8%;NI=4.7% MEAN=2.99	Contract farming for Hotels and export etc <i>MEAN- 3.11; Std Dev.- .92</i>	Contract farming for Hotels and export etc <i>MEAN- 3.03; Std Dev.- 1.04</i>
Crop production using modern irrigation and fertilization methods VSI=32.1%;SI=37.7%;I=21.7%;NI=5.7% MEAN=2.98	Intensive methods of poultry production <i>MEAN- 3.02; Std Dev.- .80</i>	Sea fisheries <i>MEAN- 2.99;Std Dev.- .99</i>
Fish farming on land e.g. Aquaculture VSI=39.6%;SI=29.2%;I=18.9%;NI=11.3% MEAN=2.98	Fish farming on land e.g. Aquaculture <i>MEAN- 2.80; Std Dev.- 1.05</i>	Intensive methods of poultry production <i>MEAN- 2.96; Std Dev.- .87</i>
Sea fisheries	Sea fisheries	Crop production using modern irrigation and fertilization

Highest overall	Highest- MALE	Highest- FEMALE
VSI=31.1%;SI=34.9%;I=18.9%;NI=10.4% MEAN=2.89	MEAN- 2.76; Std Dev.- .92	methods MEAN- 2.86; Std Dev.- .97
Intensive methods of pig production VSI=22.6%;SI=34%;I=21.7%;NI=19.8% MEAN=2.60	Intensive methods of pig production MEAN- 2.63; Std Dev.- .93	Intensive methods of pig production MEAN- 2.58; Std Dev.- 1.14
Illegal farming of crops VSI=14.2%;SI=10.4%;I=10.4%;NI=63.2% MEAN=1.76	Illegal farming of crops MEAN- 2.08; Std Dev.- 1.24	Illegal farming of crops MEAN- 1.53; Std Dev.- .97

VSI; Very Strong Interest; SI; Strong Interest; Some Interest; NI; Little/No Interest